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# Rural Professionals' Perceptions of Minority Disparity within the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Rural Professionals' Perceptions of Minority Disparity within the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Submitted by Jessica L. Christenson  
May, 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University & University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota

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## **Abstract**

Overrepresentation is defined as a specific racial or ethnic group being overrepresented in comparison to their representation in the general population. In the case of racial minorities, this overrepresentation has been documented specifically with African American populations and focusing on urban environments throughout a system known as the “school-to-prison pipeline”. This pipeline includes social welfare, special education, school disciplinary referrals, the juvenile justice system, and the adult justice system. This study looked at rural professionals’ perceptions of the overrepresentation phenomenon specifically within their rural community with a focus on that areas primary racial minority, Hispanics. Using a quantitative design in survey format, 120 rural professionals including mainstream teachers, special education teachers, parole officers, county attorneys, judges, social services employees, and policemen and women were surveyed. Data was analyzed by running descriptive statistics on all responses and again breaking them out into three categories: education professionals, social services professionals, and justice system professionals. Findings indicate that the degree to which rural professionals believe overrepresentation exists in their community varies. Their perceptions also vary in regards to what contributes to overrepresentation as well. These findings point to a potential lack of communication among professionals in regards to their specific roles when working with members in their community, specifically those of a racial minority group and a need for further research to better understand if a perception gap exists between professionals and the racial minority population itself.

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## Introduction

Race and crime have been popular topics of research for decades and their relationship has been the focal point of countless studies. Research has uncovered numerous ways that race and crime are intertwined, but one conclusion that has been especially highlighted is the *prevalence* of race when crime is examined. Countless research studies show that racial minorities are not represented in criminal statistics in the same way that they are represented in the general population, known as disproportionality. This is defined as a specific racial or ethnic group being over or underrepresented in comparison to their representation in the general population. When these numbers are compared to a reference group, in most cases white populations, it is referred to as disparity (Morton, Ocasio, & Simmel, 2011).

As research on this topic has expanded, the relationship between race and crime begins long before crimes are ever committed. A popular focus of research known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” has become the lens in which researchers look at the factors contributing to racial disproportionality in criminal activity. This pipeline illustrates the disparity that occurs between racial minorities and white children in terms of juvenile justice, mental health, and various other human services (Osher, Quinn, Poirier, & Rutherford, 2003). Essentially, this pipeline suggests that racial minority students are disproportionately exposed to impoverished conditions which are often associated with a lack of resources, which leads to poor success in school, which leads to disciplinary action or juvenile criminal activity, which worsens their academic successes, which leads to a life of perpetuated poverty, which is so often times associated with criminal activity and imprisonment (Wald & Losen, 2003). Retrospective data supports the existence of

such a pipeline with studies showing that in 1997, 68% of state prison inmates had not finished high school (Wald & Losen, 2003), 75% of youth sentenced into adult prisons had not completed a tenth grade level of education, and within the juvenile justice system as many as 70% struggle with learning disabilities, as well as 33% reading below a fourth grade reading level (“Abandoned”, 2001). Furthermore, as far as females are concerned, the greatest predictor of arrests in their future is a history of having repeated a grade in school, suspensions, or expulsions (“Justice by Gender”, 2001). This school-to-prison pipeline lays the foundation for framing previous literature in a way that leads us into the current study’s focus on possible contributing factors that lead to disproportionality or disparity within the different stages of this pipeline.

### **Literature Review**

Understanding that criminal activity involvement does not necessarily begin in adulthood, it is important to take a close look at the places in which a child’s trajectory to enter and continue in the pipeline occurs. The following sections will outline areas where racial disparities arise in a chronological fashion, mirroring the school-to-prison pipeline. It will begin at social welfare, the first place that racial minority children often enter into disparity, followed by special education, school discipline, the juvenile justice system, and finally, the adult justice system. Within each of these settings, the literature review addresses ways in which disparity exists, as well as hypothesizes as to what may be responsible for that disparity. Finally, it will analyze the urban and rural environments that these disparities can occur in and the effect that location has on disparity.

## **Social Welfare**

Numerous studies have suggested that out-of-home placement (the removal of a child from their home and placement into a foster home or residential facility) rates, for African-American children are anywhere from three to twelve times higher than for white children (Mech, 1983; Goerge, Wulczyn, & Harden, 1994; Garland et al., 1998; Hill, 2001; Lau et al., 2003). African-American children comprise only 15% of the United States' children population, but account for 41% of children in foster care (Perez, O'Neil, & Gesiriech, 2003). This is especially disturbing when it is noted that once African American children enter the foster care system they are more likely to spend more time in the social welfare system (Goerge, 1990; McMurtry & Lie 1992; Courtney, 1994), reenter the system more times (Courtney et al., 1996), are less likely to be adopted (Barth et al., 1994), and are less likely to ever return to their families (Child Welfare League of America, 2002).

Social welfare research regarding Native American children is also extensive. Ards and associates (2003) examined data from Minnesota between 1993 and 2000. They found that cases involving Native American children were four to five times more likely to be found as substantiated, meaning that they met Minnesota's definition of maltreatment. Moreover, Edmund Much (1983) found that Native American children were nearly at three times the risk of being placed outside of their homes than white children. Similar findings of placement risk were noted in the states of Arizona, Oklahoma, and North Dakota (Plantz, 1989). It has also been found that Native American children often enter the foster care system at a younger age than their white



peers and that adoption rates for Native American children are decreasing while non-Native American adoptions have increased (Plantz, 1989).

The conclusions as to what causes racial disparity in social welfare services have been mixed. While there are studies that claim race plays a significant role in determining child welfare cases even when controlling for other factors (Spearly & Lauderdale, 1983; Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Courtney, 1996; Sedlak & Broadhurt, 1996; Sedlak & Schultz, 2001; Lau et al, 2003), there are others that claim that race is not (Runyan et al. 1981; Katz et al. 1986; Jones & McCurdy, 1992; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1997; Zuravin & DePanfilis, 1997; Tittle, Harris, & Poertner, 2000). Findings by Fluke and associates (2003) suggest that differential treatment is partly to blame for racial disparity due to African American cases being accepted at a higher rate for investigation than those involving white children. Studies that suggest race is not the reason for disparity in social welfare do so by attributing the cause to socioeconomic status, child characteristics, caregiver statistics, functional concerns, family design, as well as the history and severity of maltreatment in the case. Specifically, Trocme, Knoke, and Blackstock (2004), looked at nearly 8,000 reports of child abuse or neglect in 1998 and found that Native American families' disproportioned representation in those reports was due to the higher presence of social assistance, young parents, and drug/alcohol use within the population.

### **Special Education**

Racial disparity in special education has been of particular historical interest among researchers and the issue has been a reported problem with the United States Office of Civil Rights since the 1970s (Ferri & Connor, 2005). African American

students represent approximately 15% of Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, but make up 20% of its special education population (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Blanchett, 2006). These students are two and a half to three times more likely to be identified as being mentally retarded, slightly more at risk of being labeled Autistic, one and a half times more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability, just over one and a half times more likely to be identified with a developmental delay, and up to two times more likely to receive the label of having a severe emotional disturbance (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002; US Department of Education, 2003; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Blanchett, 2006). The presence of disparity in special education has also been found for Latino and American Indian students as well (Artiles & Trent, 2000; Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002).

While special education services are vital for students who genuinely have learning disabilities and require the tailored classes, it can be disastrous for those wrongfully identified. Special education classes are typically instructed by less qualified teachers who have lower expectations and maintain lower accountability for their students; the curriculum is less challenging; the pace is slower; students of all diagnoses are taught together, rather than being separated by diagnosis despite their differing needs; have fewer opportunities to socially interact with mainstream students; often do not receive a high school diploma, but rather a certificate of completion which reduces future employment opportunities that can lead to poverty, reliance upon government support programs, teen pregnancies, and increased chances of being involved in crime (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Chamberlain, 2005; Shealey et al., 2005; Blanchett, 2006; Cartledge, 2007). In addition, special education students spend 60% or more of their day in a

special education setting, segregated with other special education and/or learning-disabled children, rather than with regular standing students (24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress, 2004). Within the context of special education v. mainstream classes, as well as minority students and white students, the United States Supreme Court concluded, “The benefits of diversity are substantial,” referencing evidence that diversity assists in the destruction of stereotypes, encourages classroom discussion, better prepares students for the outside world, and provides universities to “cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry” (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009, p. 391).

A number of studies indicate that the disproportionality of racial minority students within special education classes is largely linked to the formal desegregation of schools (Williams, 1987; Patton, 1998; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Reid & Knight, 2006; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009). This came to be through the famous court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, after which Justice Warren was quoted stating that segregating students “generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way very unlikely ever to be undone” (Williams, 1987 p.34). Over half of a century after those words were spoken, data suggests that we have done little to abide by this law of desegregation in schools, but rather segregation occurs through minority students attending schools that are disadvantaged resourcefully and economically (Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

Following this federally mandated desegregation, many districts were brought to court due to increased overrepresentation of minority students in special education diagnosis and classes. In 1971, *Johnson v. San Francisco Unified School District* reported that 28.5% of student’s in the district were African American, but they made up

66% of the student's with a "mildly retarded" diagnosis (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). In the same year, *Larry P. v. Riles* concluded that another San Francisco school district had an overrepresentation of minority students in its special education classes (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

Many studies point toward subjective reasons for racial minority overrepresentation in this setting, namely that segregation is a form of discrimination (Anderson, 1997; Ferri & Connor, 2005; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006; Ong-Dean, 2006; Reid & Knight, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009). Following the years of formal desegregation teachers reported many academic discrepancies between their African American and white students, typically being described as "below average" and "inferior" (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p. 6). They explained that due to the difficulties in managing academic capacity, cultural backgrounds, behavioral patterns, and personality, they were unable to teach their white students properly. It was stated that "retarded Negroes should be given special attention in classes for slow children, so that they would not burden the regular classes," and one teacher even noted that the disparities were due to "conflict between traditional standards for middle-class white children and lower standards, which Negroes in segregated schools and at home had been accustomed to" (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p. 7). It is important to note that while racial attitudes at the time of desegregation were different from those presently widespread, teachers who had previous exposure to racial diversity at the time of desegregation gave very different accounts of experiences, noting far fewer academic and social differences between their white and African American students. Racial segregation, whether intentionally put in place by any system, certainly does exist as nearly three-fourths of both African

American and Latino students attend schools in which the majority of the students enrolled are of color (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Lee, 2003). This is potentially corroborated by the fact that Southern states in that they have the highest rate of overrepresentation of minorities even after controlling for socioeconomic status, which research potentially attributes to a longer standing history of racial segregation (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

Another factor that has been identified to explain the cause of disproportionality of minority students in special education classes is how a child becomes involved in special education classes. The categories of special education diagnosis that minority students are often overrepresented in are classified as social model disabilities, which are the most common assessments to contain subjective criteria, and are noted as being very unreliable (Terman et. al., 1996). Many children receive a diagnosis in one school, but not another, be referred for behavioral rather than learning centered disabilities, or receive an entirely different diagnosis due to them sharing so many common characteristics (Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011). A study conducted in 1979 and then replicated again in 1999 by the National Research Council found that the overrepresentation of minority students (both African American and Latino) was due to unfair assessment practices (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006). It is noted by Donovan and Cross (2002) that IQ tests, commonly used in the assessment of learning disabilities, “are measures of what individuals have learned, that is, it is useful to think of them as tests of general achievement, reflecting broad culturally rooted ways of thinking and problem solving. These tests are only indirect measures of success with the school curriculum and imperfect predictors of school achievement (p. 284).

Another hypothesized contributor for racial minorities' presence in special education is the "cultural mismatch" between the students and teachers (Blanchett, 2006; Shealey et al., 2005, p. 6; Cartledge, 2007). It is theorized that teachers fail to provide their students with "culturally-responsive" instruction (Shealey et al, 2005, p. 5-8) and this creates a big problem when 90% of United States public school teachers identify themselves as white and 40% of the student population belongs to a racial minority (Delpit, 1995). This may cause an instructor to not be aware of cultural differences in disability perceptions, the availability of culturally sensitive services, and have a general lack of knowledge in reference to cultural beliefs of their students (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999; Rueda, Monzo, Blacher, Shapiro, & Gonzalez, 2005). This may be why research has shown that teachers tend to make more African American student referrals to special education based on behavior issues rather than their white student referrals, which tend to be more academically based (Gottlieb et al., 1991).

Assessments for special education may not only be biased toward racial minorities in general, but also racial minorities in terms of language. Ochoa, Pecheco, and Omark (1988) found that students who speak only limited English are more likely to be placed in special education classes. This is primarily disturbing because federal regulations specifically state that neither cultural differences, nor limited English proficiency is to be associated with identifying learning disabilities (Artiles et al., 2005; Klingner & Harry, 2006). It appears to be an issue that has stood the test of time. In 1970, the court case *Diana v. State Board of Education* filed an action suit for nine Hispanic children, each of whom had been required to take an IQ test in English. All nine, as a result were labeled as mentally retarded and forced into special education

classes. After review and a reassessment by a Spanish-speaking examiner, only one of the original nine children maintained their special education status (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Forty years later, a study by Wilkinson et al., (2006) found that among 21 special education students in Texas, who were bilingual in Spanish and English, 10 of them were wrongfully diagnosed and their disabilities were due to a language barrier. These effects take place in a specific progression with racial minority elementary students speaking another language being underrepresented in special education due to the abundance of language assistance classes, but are then overrepresented in high schools due to the perception that their English language proficiency should be on track at that point and language assistance classes are typically no longer offered (Echevarria & Graves, 1998; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001; Artiles et al., 2005).

Finally, the disproportionality of racial minority students in poverty may be attributing to their overrepresentation in special education. The Department of Education (2005) identified that in 2005, 70% of African American students lived in poverty, 71% of Hispanic students, and only 23% of white students. These students' poverty status highly correlated with their school's poverty status as well. In the same study, the Department of Education (2005) noted that 47% of African Americans, 51% of Hispanic students, and only 5% of white students attended schools that were considered high poverty. These statistics are significant because concentrated poverty within school districts often results in teachers who are less qualified and have fewer resources, which can lead to poor education for children, resulting in what could appear to be learning disabilities that are simply a missed educational opportunity (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006). However, it is important to reflect on the fact that poverty is

also associated with poor nutrition, health, and chronic stress, which can have consequences for a child's brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is interesting to note that the level of poverty a racial minority student is at affects their special education diagnosis as well. It was found that African American and Hispanic students living in high poverty districts were more likely to be labeled as learning disabled or emotionally/behaviorally disabled and less likely to be segregated, as opposed to low poverty districts, where they were more likely to be labeled as mentally retarded and placed into special education classrooms (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006).

### **School Discipline**

For more than 30 years, it has been consistently documented that racial minority students, particularly African American, are overrepresented in suspensions, expulsions, and office referrals (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Taylor & Foster, 1986; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Thornton & Trent, 1988; Uchitelle, Bartz, & Hillman, 1988; Irvine, 1990; Ogbu, 1991, 1994; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Gould, 1999; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Raffaele Mendez Y Knoff, 2003; Gonzalez & Szecsy, 2004; Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Skiba et al., 2008; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010).

African American students have been found to be between three and seven times more likely to be suspended than their white peers (Raffaele, Mendez, & Knoff, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003) and two times as likely to receive discipline referrals (Nelson, Gonzalez, Epstein, & Benner, 2003). As of 2000, African American students made up 17% of the total student population, but accounted for 34% of all suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Similarly, a study looking at 52 schools in the metropolitan Midwest



found that African American students while comprising only 23% of the student population, comprised 40% of the student disciplinary referrals and 35% of suspensions (Nichols, 2004). Another study in Florida found that nearly 50% of African American males were suspended at some point in their academic career, whereas only 25% of their white peers did (Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002). It has also been shown that African American students are often sent to the office for less serious offenses than white students (Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2008). Specifically, African American students were more likely to be disciplined for more subjective offenses such as showing disrespect, verbal threats, or making excessive noise. White students, on the other hand, were more likely to be referred for more objective problems such as smoking or vandalism (Skiba et al., 2002). These findings are similar for Latino, Loa, and Hmong students at schools in which they are the primary minority population (Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

School discipline, namely suspension and expulsion, can have very negative effects for students. There is documented evidence that it is not very effective in extinguishing the behavior it was given in consequence of (Nichols, 2004; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). The act of removing a child from school has been shown to cause a loss in classroom learning time (Farmer, 1996), academic failure, negative attitudes toward school, increased dropout rates (Oppenheimer & Ziegler, 1988; Walker & Sprague, 1999; Sprague & Walker, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Morrison, Anthony, Storino, & Dillon, 2001), contribute to delinquent behavior outside of the school setting, poor academic performance, increase truancy, less extracurricular activity involvement (Alpert & Dunham, 1986; Oppenheimer & Ziegler, 1988; Walker & Sprague, 1999; Morrison &

Skiba, 2001; Foney & Cunningham, 2002), and has also been linked to an increase in antisocial behavior (Mayer, 1995).

Research to date, has pointed toward two explanations as to why racial minority students are overrepresented in school disciplinary actions. The first is that racial minorities are simply involved more in misconduct, known as the differential involvement thesis (Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994). However, Rossell and Hawley (1981) suggest that this is not the case, but rather it is due to a cultural misunderstanding that leads to a disproportionate number of referrals, known as the discrimination thesis.

As previously discussed, there is data to support that many racial minority students are not taught by an instructor who is also a racial minority. This can often lead to what was referred to earlier as a “cultural mismatch” that leads to an increase in discipline referrals (Irvine, 1990; Villegas, 1991; Foster, 1993; Ogbu, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gould, 1999). Teachers’ perceptions of their students and their students’ behavior can have a major impact on how teachers choose to deal with those behaviors. Ogbu (2003) and Tyler et al. (2008) discuss that the culture of African American students is often times more vocal and involves greater physical contact than that of their white peers and this is rarely viewed by white teachers as being appropriate in their classroom (Tyler, Boykin, Miller, & Hurley, 2006). Other studies suggest that teachers who perceived their African American students to walk with a “stroll” (often referred to as “swag”) were also more likely to be perceived as being lower in achievement as well as having higher rates of aggression. There was a similar effect when teachers perceived their white students as “being black” (Neal et al., 2003 p. 8). Similarly, it has been found

that white teachers are more likely than their African American co-workers to hold negative expectations for their African American students, provide them with less attention, give them less positive feedback for successes, and criticize them more (Irvine, 1990; Rubovitz & Maehr, 1973). These perception based reasons for removal of minority students from the classroom are corroborated by the findings of many researchers. African American students most often receive school disciplinary referrals for subjective and socially constructed reasons such as excessive noise or disrespectful behavior (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Townsend, 2000; Studley, 2002).

Another body of research points to schools as being a subculture in which members of it must fit a certain norm to be successful, but also to simply receive the chance to be successful. Casella (2003) identifies that many school personnel simply do not perceive racial minorities as “fitting into the norm of the school.” This can often lead to the perception that those individuals outside of the norm are “dangerous” (Casella, 2003, p. 5) or “troublemakers” (Bowditch, 1993, p. 3). Students of racial minority, unfortunately face an even bigger challenge as they are often times targeted out of fear and anxiety by their teachers, thus putting them at even greater risk for classroom removal (Wald & Losen, 2003). It has also been reported that schools with educators who have advanced degrees as well as more years in the field have a greater disparity between racial minority and white suspensions, suggesting that racial minority students do not fit the norms of more affluent schools that have resources available to obtain such experienced educators (Talley, Rajack-Talley, & Tewksbury, 2005). All of the above is likely exacerbated since “No Child Left Behind” entered schools attaching federal

funding to a school's ability to perform on standardized testing, therefore putting more pressure on school personnel to create an academically successful environment by almost any means necessary (Fenning & Rose, 2007).

Finally, it has been suggested, that similarly to special education, school disciplinary referrals has been used as a form of informal segregation (Larkin, 1979; Rossell & Hawley, 1981; Thornton & Trent, 1988; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). A study conducted in Milwaukee, WI, during the first two years following federally mandated desegregation found that schools previously labeled as white schools and had a large influx of African American students had the highest disproportionality in suspension of African American students (Larkin, 1979). This is contradictory to the larger national picture, in which there was not an overall increase in suspensions.

### **Juvenile Justice System**

Data obtained in 2004 showed that African American youth made up 16% of the population between the ages of 10 and 17, but constituted 39.1% of detained youth, 35.9% of cases handled formally in the juvenile court system, 33% of youth formally charged, and 44% of youth cases transferred to adult court. Caucasian youth at the same time made up 69% of the population between the ages of 10 and 17, but constituted only 60.9% of detained youth, 64.1% of cases handled formally in the juvenile court system, 67% of youth formally charged, and 56% of youth cases transferred to adult court (Stahl et al., 2007). The 2000 census shows African American youth made up the same percentage of the national general population, but in 2006, they accounted for 59% of murder arrests, 51% of violent crimes, 31% of property offenses, and 30% of drug use arrests (Federal Bureau of Investigation). Studies show that other racial minorities

including Hispanic, Native American, and Asian Americans have similar experiences with overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system (Fisher & Doyle-Martin, 1981; Blumstein & Graddy, 1982; Bell & Lang, 1985; National Prison Project, 1990; Leiber, 1994; Bonczar & Beck, 1997; Bond-Maupin & Maupin, 1998). Specifically, in comparing youth with no prior criminal record, African American youth are six times more likely, and Latino youth three times more likely to be incarcerated for the same crime than their white peers (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2000).

The major findings of research to explain the cause(s) of overrepresentation of minority youth in the juvenile justice system comprise of: differential involvement in the commitment of crime, discrimination that occurs at any or all levels of the decision making process, and finally, that there is a combination of the two that arises in the creation of policies that are discriminatory in nature (Hindelang, 1975).

Differential involvement is typically looked at as having a cultural connection. Essentially, this approach explains that differential involvement by racial minority youth may have more to do with the cultural background of the youth, rather than their racial status itself (Anderson, 1999). Anderson (1999) talks about racial segregation into poor minority communities that have their own subculture, “whose norms are often consciously opposed to that of mainstream society” (p. 33). We often link these minority subcultures with the picture of urban environments which are often seen as criminogenic (Wu & Fuentes, 1998), or an environment that produces or enriches the opportunity for crime (Webster, 2011). This is supported by data of detained youth showing that white youths’ families were evenly distributed across urban, suburban, and rural environments (roughly 33% in each), but African American youths’ families residing in 51.9% urban,

19.6% suburban, and 28% rural (McCarter, 2009). This phenomenon of racial minorities residing in more urban than rural environments lends itself to that group being overrepresented in statistics because urban areas tend to have more formal juvenile justice systems, whereas rural areas are more often required to seek alternatives to incarceration of their youth (Feld, 1991).

Poverty, poor education, and poor social skills have all been linked as being of high prevalence to many racial minority youth as well as an explanation behind the cultural contributor to differential involvement (Drakeford & Garfinkel, 2000). One study showed that among detained youth, 86% of African American youth and only 63% of white youth had a family income of less than \$25,000 per year (McCarter, 2009). Similarly, 39.3% of African American youth had repeated a grade in school, whereas only 28.1% of white youth had (McCarter, 2009). This was an important factor to note because the youth who had to repeat a grade were just over one and a half times more likely to be incarcerated (McCarter, 2009). McCarter (2009) reported that both judges as well as juveniles agreed that education was integral to staying out of the juvenile justice system. One judge was quoted saying, “The majority of court-involved youth cannot read or write sufficiently to succeed in today’s society” (p. 541).

Next is the idea of differential selection. This is the idea that there is the potential for bias to be shown at any decision point during the juvenile justice process, including at the time of arrest, whether or not to formally charge the youth, and whether or not to pursue incarceration as punishment (McCarter, 2009). In 2001, a study was conducted on both federal and state levels that determined that minority youth were overrepresented in every state and at all decision-points (Leiber, 2002). A number of studies have had

similar results, finding that differential selection occurs at police presence in specific communities, arrests, convictions, and incarceration decisions (Hindelang, 1978; Cohen & Kluegel, 1978; Bishop & Frazier, 1990; Polpe & Feyerherm, 1990a; Chambliss, 1994, 1995; Tonry, 1995; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995; Zimring & Hawkins, 1997; Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997; Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2000; Bilchik, 1999; Hawkins, Laub, Lauritsen, & Cothorn, 2000). McCarter (2009) found that in youth awaiting sentencing, 22.5% of white youth were diverted out of the formal criminal justice system, while just 15.3% of African American youth were diverted out. Only 8.9% of white youth were incarcerated upon sentencing, but 19.4% of African American youth were incarcerated. This calculates to African American males having been slightly more than one and a half times more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers (McCarter, 2009). This phenomenon occurs regardless of the seriousness of crime as well. In New Jersey, of youth being tried for first-degree crimes, only 10% of white youth were formally charged, whereas 31% of African American youth were formally charged (U.S. Department of Justice, 1990). Bishop and Frazier (1990) had similar findings, noting that in Florida, minority youth received harsher penalties than their white peers for the same crime.

The previously mentioned idea of minority youth being a part of an urban subculture is also pertinent to the idea of differential selection. There are stereotypes attached to certain neighborhoods, which are often racially segregated, that can affect the decision making of professionals within the juvenile justice system. Many feel that the social conditions of these neighborhoods breeds certain behavior patterns that create more contact with law enforcement. These youth are often stereotypically perceived as

being more dangerous than their white peers (Fisher & Doyle-Martin, 1981). One officer specifically stated, “Where you have a black community that has a different set of standards than the traditional white community and the additional problem in the home is not present in the traditional white home. The expectations of the community, as far as lawful behavior, are not the same. They grow up with different expectations that people won’t expect” (Talley, Rajack-Talley, & Tewksbury, 2005, p. 71). This attitude causes many racial minority neighborhoods to be policed more heavily than white communities (Hawkins, 1987; Reiman, 1990; Talley, Rajack-Talley, & Tewksbury, 2005). Bon-Maupin and Maupin (1998) found that a similar heavy police presence was found among primarily Hispanic neighborhoods as well, which ultimately led to that population being overrepresented in juvenile court. Judges and county attorneys share these same stereotyped perceptions of African American communities often associating them with gangs, high crime rates, drug use, violence, and reduced parental control (Talley, Rajack-Talley, & Tewksbury, 2005).

One surprising factor to note that appears to play a role in influencing professionals at decision-making points is family structure. McCarter (2009) showed that 44.2% of the youth awaiting sentencing belonged to a two-parent family, whereas 42.8% of African American youth came from a single mother family. Similarly, when discussed with professionals, 71% of them said that familial factors made a difference in treatment options and they ranked the impact of family structure at an average of 4.47 on a scale one to five (McCarter, 2009). The impact of the family structure on a professional’s opinion is often stereotype based. For example, Native American youth are often assumed to be from families with a high level of alcohol use and dysfunction in both



structure and culture (Bond-Maupin, 1996). This can also contribute to minority youth being more likely to be incarcerated rather than released on probation or given other community-based punishments because minority youth homes are seen as unable to provide the proper supervision for delinquent children and are more likely to condone or foster poor behaviors, thereby creating a bias for professionals to incarcerate minority youth instead (Bishop & Frazier, 1996).

Finally, there is a mixed model, in that both differential involvement and differential selection occur through discriminatory capacities due to policies and legislation being passed to more harshly punish crime that racial minority groups tend to be more involved in than their white peers (Kaye, 1982; Tonry, 1995). For example, in Minnesota the sentencing law for first time users of crack cocaine is a 4-year incarceration sentence, but for first time powder cocaine users it is only probation. Ninety-two percent of crack cocaine possession arrests are African Americans, whereas 85% of powder cocaine possession arrests are white (Raspberry, 1991). This, in turn, leads to higher arrest rates for African Americans simply due to the law in place, rather than a large disparity in the essence of the crime committed.

An important factor to note when discussing the differential involvement of minority youth in crime, their increased likelihood of formal sentencing and their increased likelihood of being incarcerated is mental and cognitive status. It has been estimated that anywhere from 30-70% of children and adolescents in juvenile corrections have some sort of special education need or learning disability (Rutherford, Nelson, & Wolford, 1985; Murphy, 1986; Casey Keilitz, 1990). Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education (2001) found that in the 2000-2001 academic year, of students between the

ages of 6 and 21, 8.8% were receiving special education services. That number among youth in juvenile correction facilities was 33.4%, almost four times higher than the mainstream population. While these numbers do not directly address minority students, previous research shows that many minority youth that are incarcerated have an increased likelihood of learning disabilities and poor education in general.

The mental health of incarcerated youth is to be addressed with pause as well. In 1991, Cohen found that 63% of youth in corrections were African American, but African American youth made up only 34% of youth in psychiatric facilities. A year later, Kaplan and Busner (1992) examined this phenomenon within New York City and found that 62% of youth admitted to mental health facilities were white and only 23% were African American. At that same time, 56% of youth admitted to correctional facilities were African American and only 28% white. This could perhaps be exactly what the numbers suggest, a greater number of white youth experiencing mental health issues and a greater number of African American youth committing crimes with no known mental health issues. Richissin (1999), however, found that in Maryland, African American and white youth presenting with similar mental health symptoms, offenses, and criminal histories were not prosecuted in the same way. African American youth more often were incarcerated and white youth were placed in residential mental health treatment.

### **Adult Justice System**

The overrepresentation of racial minorities (specifically African American and Latino) is not new information and has been the topic of study for decades (Mbuba, 2009). Better understanding the phenomenon, however, has become a hot topic once again because of a rising prison population; as of 2003, there were 2.1 million inmates in

the United States (Wald & Losen, 2003). Data from 2004 show for every 100,000 African Americans in the United States, there are 3,218 incarcerated. That number drops to 463 when analyzing the white population (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). This is an adjusted rate of African Americans being nearly seven times more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers are to be incarcerated. This is a phenomenon that occurs not only in the United States, but at an international level as well (Tonry, 1999) with racial minorities in Australia being 16 times more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

Reasons for overrepresentation of racial minorities incarcerated in the prison system can be accounted for by the same explanations that were discussed for the juvenile justice system as well. There is evidence cultural factors that may disadvantage racial minority populations exist at this level as well as discriminatory factors persisting through the adult justice system (Spohn & Holleran, 2000; Zatz, 2000; Deumuth & Steffensmeier, 2004; Ulmer & Johnson, 2004; Steen et al., 2005). It appears that there is strong evidence that much of the potential system bias exists at arrest level with differential policing of neighborhoods as well as a tendency to assume guilt of a racial minority upon encounter (Mbuba, 2009).

### **Urban v. Rural Environments**

There are generalized stereotypes that have developed over time about both urban and rural environments. Rural environments tend to be described as having low population, a strong reliance on few resources, kinship, and unique relationships with their schools, churches, and community, a strong sense of “roots”, social stability, close interpersonal relationships, and conservative values (Tonnies, 1957; Rogers & Burdige,

1972; Hassinger & Whiting, 1976; Crowell, George, Blazer, & Landerman, 1986; Bauch, 2001). In contrast, urban environments are often described as environments of change and places of conflicting values, social isolation, racial segregation, poverty, instability, impersonality, and poor social control (Weber, 1970; Crowell, George, Blazer, & Landerman, 1986; Martin, McCarthy, Conger, Simons, Brody, Gibbons, Cutrona, 2010).

Mirroring the timeline of the school-to-prison pipeline, urban and rural schools share both commonalities and differentiations. There is a general census that poverty is a shared trait of both inner-city schools as well as rural schools (Arnold et al., 2005). This creates a more equal environment between the two demographics because it serves as a control when looking at how educational resources affect juvenile outcomes. However, the major difference between urban and rural schools is the way that they are perceived by the community. There is a much tighter link between rural schools and their community than is the case when comparing that relationship to an urban environment (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). For rural communities, the school serves as not only a place for educating youth, but also as a social center for the community as a whole. Schools are an economic hub providing a great source of employment, a place for gathering, and use as a recreational facility (Miller, 1993).

The statistics regarding crime when looking at urban and rural environments do not necessarily match what the stereotypes listed above would suggest. While overall, it has been found that urban environments are characterized by more crime than rural areas (Sherbenou, 1976; Sadalla, 1978; Fischer, 1984; Flango & Sampson, 1986; Spector, 1975; Tittle, 1989; Websdale & Johnson, 1998; Van Dijk, 1999; Webster, 2007) it is important to note that there are subtle differences in the kinds of crimes and

circumstances of crime between the two. Weisheit and Wells (2000) found that in looking at the 30 highest counties in terms of homicide rates, 17 were nonmetropolitan, nine of which were completely rural. This could possibly be explained by the fact that crimes of violence often occur between people who are familiar to one another, therefore making it more likely that they would occur in a rural environment where interpersonal relationships are more prevalent (Sacco, Johnson, & Arnold, 1993). Urban environments, therefore, are often found to have a higher prevalence of victimless crime, such as theft (Bell-Towbotham & Boydell, 1972; Chappell & Hatch, 1986; Sacco, Johnson, & Arnold, 1993). Along these lines, it is interesting to note that upon investigation, as economic conditions worsen property crime in urban environments increases, whereas in rural environments, the opposite is true (Freudenburg & Jones, 1991; Wells & Weisheit, 2000; Lee & Ousey, 2001). This suggests that social factors play a larger role in rural environment crime and economic factors play a larger role in urban crime (Donnermeyer, Jobes, Barclay, 1999; Jobes, 1999; Osgood & Chambers, 2000).

Previous literature has greatly focused around the investigation of African Americans as a minority group and done so primarily in urban environments. While a handful of research has been conducted with the Hispanic population as the focal minority group, these need to be expanded, as Hispanics are the fastest growing and largest present minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). There are numerous researchers suggesting more of a focus on rural investigation as well (DeYoung, 1987; Weisheit & Wells, 1996; Evans, Fitzgerald, Weigel, & Chvilicek, 1999; Arnold et al., 2005). The prevalence of rural environments is often overlooked, but Flora (1997) stated, “As of 1990 there were a total of 23,435 places within the United

States, 77% of them were outside of urban areas, and 60% of the places had populations of less than 2,500” (p. 113). It has been said that research has become “urban ethnocentric” (Weisheit, 1993). With these two gaps of previous research in mind, the present study will look at rural professionals’ perceptions regarding the contributing factors and prevalence of disproportionality with the Hispanic population in regards to social welfare, special education, school discipline, the juvenile justice system, and the adult justice system.

### **Theoretical Framework**

It is integral to understand the foundation upon which this current research is built. Each researcher brings a unique sense of self to their work, both in the way that they understand previous literature as well as the way in which they go about creating new work. There are various theories in existence that can influence a researcher’s path, experiences in their professional work that have influenced them, as well as encounters in their everyday lives that have left an impression.

There are two major theories that have influenced the way in which the researcher has viewed the previous literature as well as the way in which to approach the current research. The first theory is that of the ecological model which has been widely used to understand youth violence (Elliot, 1994; Evans & Mason, 1996; Tolan & Guerra 1994). The ecological model is based on the premise that there are multiple levels influencing any given situation such as at an individual level, a family level, and a community level (Evans, Fitzgerald, Weigel, & Chvilicek, 1999). This is an important perspective when trying to understand the disparity of racial minorities within the school-to-prison pipeline because there is the possibility for so many variables to be at play. The ecological model

provides the ability to understand the problem as a big picture, understanding that there may not be one simple answer.

The second theory pertinent to this subject is the learning theory, often known as the social learning theory. This theory is based on the idea of behavior and that behaviors are learned and retained by their outcomes (Bandura, 1973). The reinforcement of these behaviors can occur directly through the consequence of their actions, by seeing the affects of the actions of those around them, or by peoples' reactions to the behaviors (Bandura, 1973). When this theory is employed for the understanding of criminal behavior, which is an important behavioral subset when looking at the school-to-prison pipeline, social theorists believe that crime serves as a "function of individual socialization, and the interactions people have with organizations, institutions, and processes of society" (Siegel, 2005, p. 155). This theory proves particularly applicable when broken down into what is known as social control theory, social reaction theory, and social conflict theory (Dechant, 2009).

Social control theory is based on the idea that an individual's behavior is shaped by society to be a certain way based on the institutions that they encounter throughout their lifetime (Siegel, 2005). Social reaction theory sees individuals have becoming labeled at a young age and based upon whatever that label may be, that individual, as well as those around them, simply expect the behavior associated with that label and any expectations of change are seemingly nonexistent (Siegel, 2005). Finally, social conflict theory is best understood as institutions or groups having power and the ability to maintain that power (Farrington & Chertok, 1993). Siegel (2005) explains it in regards to criminality as:

A political concept designed to protect the power and position of the upper classes at the expense of the poor. The idea is that each society produces its own type and amount of crime. They have their own way of dealing with crime, and thus get the amount of crime that they deserve. (p. 186)

This theory suggests that in order to reduce crime, social conditions that promote crime are the primary target for reducing that crime (Dechant, 2009). Social learning theory and its subset of theories are useful because it, much like the ecological model, approaches the idea of punishment and crime as a multifaceted issue. Within the social learning theory there are multitudes of ways that an individual could be on a trajectory toward the school-to-prison pipeline as well as perpetuated in that trajectory.

The above mentioned theories help explain the fragility of the conversations that can occur when discussing not only the school-to-prison pipeline, but that pipeline within the context of race. It is because the issues surrounding the topic are so complex and can be cause for a lot of blaming that an anonymous study was chosen to create the opportunity to foster as much honesty about the subject as possible. Also, these theories have broadened the way the researcher will interpret the data in that, they will not be looking for a clear cut answer. This research is not based on a concrete hypothesis, *per se*, but is rather exploratory in nature and that is because these theories have displayed that the complexity surrounding this issue of race and the school-to-prison pipeline is far too great to expect a singular answer to explain the phenomenon.

The researcher's professional experiences at this point in her life are limited. She does not have great quantities of exposure to the areas involved in the school-to-prison pipeline, nor with racial minorities in her work. The little exposure that she does have in



working with racial minorities has led her to understand that there are racial minorities who differ a great deal from their Caucasian peers, as well as racial minorities who are extremely similar. Essentially, the researcher has found that stereotypes of people in general, regardless of their racial label, are just that; stereotypes. They apply to some and do not apply to others, but generalizing is not safe practice. This knowledge, much like the theories previously discussed, has provided the researcher with a more complex way of approaching this topic. The previous literature was not going to point her in a single direction, nor should she expect that the results from the current research would either. It did provide a critical lens when creating the literature review in that she will be hesitant of single cause findings, where the research concluded that one explanation was sufficient to explain the disparity of racial minorities within a specific system.

In regards to the current study, the researcher's personal lens is very important. She grew up in a rural community with what began as a small racial minority population that has since grown into a very large racial minority population. The researcher believes that this experience has made her acutely aware of the stereotypes in existence about racial minorities, racism within a rural community context, as well as the rural community functions that do not serve to alleviate the stresses of racial minorities. This has influenced the way in which the researcher approached the topic in that she somewhat expects racism to be a consistent factor in the disparity of racial minorities within the school-to-prison pipeline settings. These personal experiences also provided the researcher with the desire to approach the research from a rural standpoint, which has been shown to be less of a priority in previous research.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of the current research is to explore rural professionals' perceptions about the disparity of racial minorities in the school-to-prison pipeline as well as what they perceive to be the potential causes of that disparity. The study was quantitative in nature and the questions incorporated in the survey were derived from data obtained in previous literature.

### **Instruments**

This study was conducted using a survey created by the researcher with the use of Qualtrics to be administered online. It contains thirty-nine questions addressing the suggested areas in which disparity occurs (social welfare, special education, school disciplinary referrals, the juvenile justice system, and the adult justice system), potential causes for that disparity, as well as if they perceive overrepresentation to be an urban issue, a rural issue, or an issue in neither or both. All of these questions were formulated based on data from previous studies. Each question asked the participant to rate on a five point scale (ranging from definitely true to definitely false) how they perceive a statement. For example, "Hispanics are overrepresented in special education and Hispanic youth live in neighborhoods that are more likely to have a police presence" (See Appendix B for complete survey).

### **Sample**

Participants for this study were found using convenience sampling. The researcher phoned and met with principals from two schools in a rural community, the sheriff's department, the police department, directors for both child and adult social

services, as well as the parole office. The participants consisted of approximately 120 professionals within the education, social service, and justice systems, including mainstream teachers, special education teachers, parole officers, county attorneys, judges, social services employees, and policemen and women.

Individuals within administration at each of the locations that participants were employed were e-mailed a private link to the survey, created using Qualtrics, and they then forwarded that link to participants. The e-mail sent to each participant included a brief introduction explaining the studies purpose (see Appendix A) and participants then gave consent by selecting either “yes or no” to the consent question at the beginning of the survey.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The safety of all human subjects was reviewed by a community research committee including a St. Thomas faculty member within the social work department, a BSW, as well as an MSW. Furthermore, this study was approved by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board to assure its ethical integrity as well as the protection of its participants. As previously stated, informed consent was obtained from all participants and all surveys were anonymous as electronic records were not kept on their identity. Completed survey data is accessible only to the researcher, and all data will be deleted upon completion of the research project in May of 2012.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of the collection of this data is to better understand what rural professionals believe contributes to the disparity of racial minorities within the school-to-prison pipeline in their community. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze each

question, each set of questions pertaining to one particular “stop” on the school-to-prison pipeline, as well as between the groups of education and justice system to find possible discrepancies. These descriptive statistics include mean, median, and standard deviations. The purpose of running these statistics was to gain a better understanding of what areas in the pipeline professionals believe contain overrepresentation as well as what factors they believe contribute most to this phenomenon. A mean of 3 for the purposes of this study indicates a neutral response, with the average response to that particular question being “neither true nor false”. The lower the mean response becomes the more the respondents’ answers moved toward perceiving the statement as true and similarly, the higher the mean response becomes the more the respondents’ answers moved toward perceiving the statement as false.

## **Findings**

### **Overall Responses**

Of the approximate 120 participants who received a survey, 46 were completed equaling a 38% response rate. Of those that responded 50% (23) identified “education” as best describing their profession, 26% (12) identified “social services”, and 24% (11) identified “justice system”.

In regards to the existence of overrepresentation in social welfare, 46% of respondents marked “neither true nor false”, 44% marked “probably true” or “definitely true”, 11% marked “probably false”, and 0 responses were given for “definitely false”. Table 1 illustrates an average response of 3.76 for racial discrimination by social service professionals, 3.39 for an inability to care for children, 2.12 for poverty, 3.05 for a less desirable family structure, 3.27 for a greater history of maltreatment, 2.68 for being more

reliant on social assistance programs, 2.54 for parents being of a lower age, 3.07 for having higher drug/alcohol use, and 2.34 for facing a language barrier with social service professionals.

Professionals' responses to whether overrepresentation in special education existed was largely neutral with 44% responding "neither true nor false", 32% responding "probably true" or "definitely true", and 24% responding "probably false" or "definitely false". Table 2 shows mean overall responses for a cultural mismatch between teachers and students was 2.73, for students legitimately qualifying for special education programs was 2.88, for language difficulties was 2.63, for lack of prenatal care was 2.9, and for segregation purposes was 4.34.

Overrepresentation in school disciplinary referrals was strongly responded to as being true with 50% of respondents answering with "probably true", 36% responding with "neither true nor false", and only 14% responding with "probably false". As illustrated in Table 3, behaviors warranting disciplinary referrals averaged a response of 2.76, cultural mismatches between teachers and students a 2.90, language barriers a 3.05, and segregation a 4.41.

The juvenile justice system appeared to have strong perceptions attached to it as well, as 56% of participants indicated that overrepresentation in this setting was "probably true", 39% responded with "neither true nor false", and only 6% responding with "probably false" or "definitely false". These strong perceptions continued among contributing factors for this phenomena. Shown in Table 4, 2.59 was the average response for the committing of more crime, 2.73 for living in neighborhoods with more police presence, 3.34 for police discrimination, 3.80 for discrimination at sentencing,

3.00 for language barriers, 2.24 for lack of parental supervision, 3.78 for discriminatory laws, and 3.24 for mental health symptoms perceived to be criminal action.

The trend continued for the perception of overrepresentation of Hispanics within the adult justice system as 55% of respondents chose “probably true” or “definitely true”, 37% chose “neither true nor false”, and only 8% chose “probably false” or “definitely false”. As Table 5 shows, the average overall response for committing more crime was 2.70, living in neighborhoods with more police presence was 2.60, being discriminated against by police was 3.15, being discriminated against at sentencing was 3.74, experiencing a language barrier was 2.65, discriminatory laws was 3.43, and mental health symptoms being perceived to be criminal action was 3.21.

In response to the question “Overrepresentation is an issue in:”, only 5% answered “rural environments”, 15% answered “urban environments”, 20% answered “neither”, and the majority with 60% answered “both”.

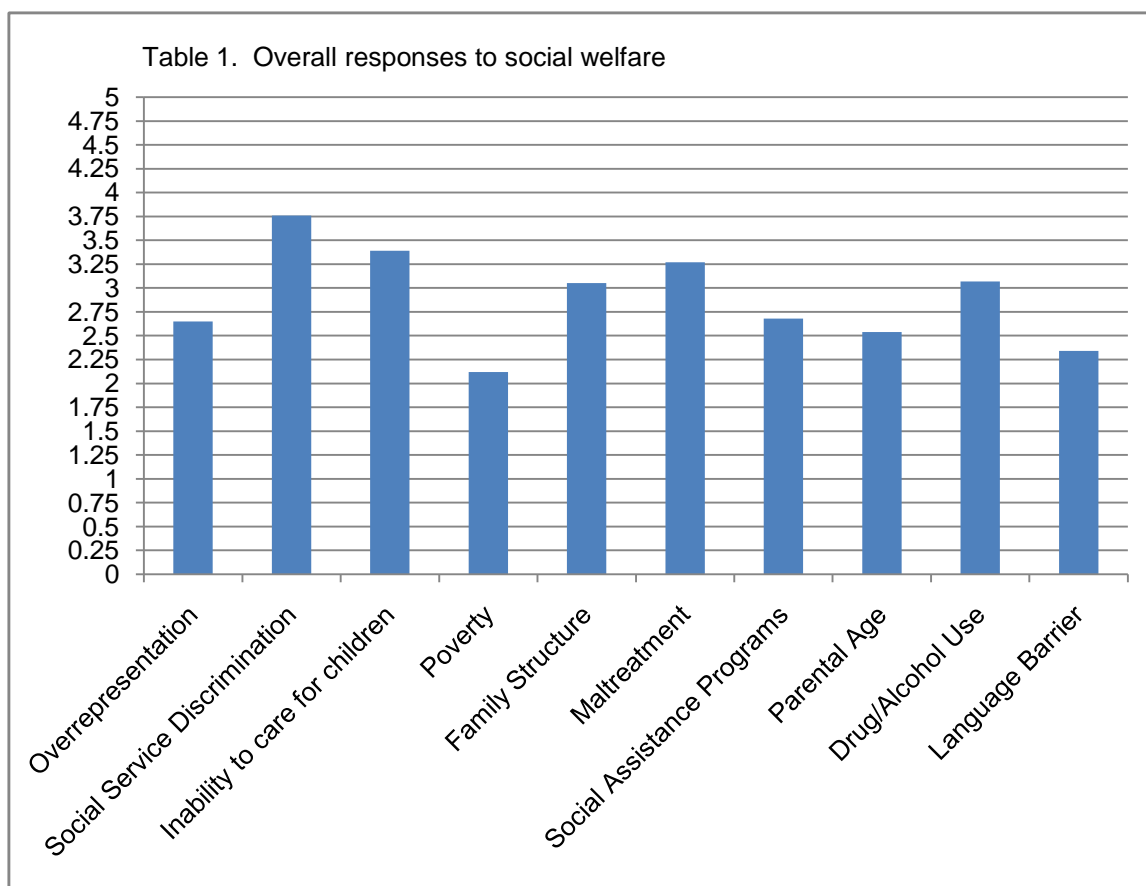
## **Discussion**

### **Overall Responses**

Looking at the overall statistics in regards to the entire respondent group, it is important to note that there was a great deal of neutrality in responses. It was very common to see “neither true nor false” as the most frequently selected choice and very rare to see “definitely true” or “definitely false”. This could possibly be due to the sensitive nature of the survey subject involving racial minorities as well as questioning about processes that may involve direct interaction with the survey respondent personally.

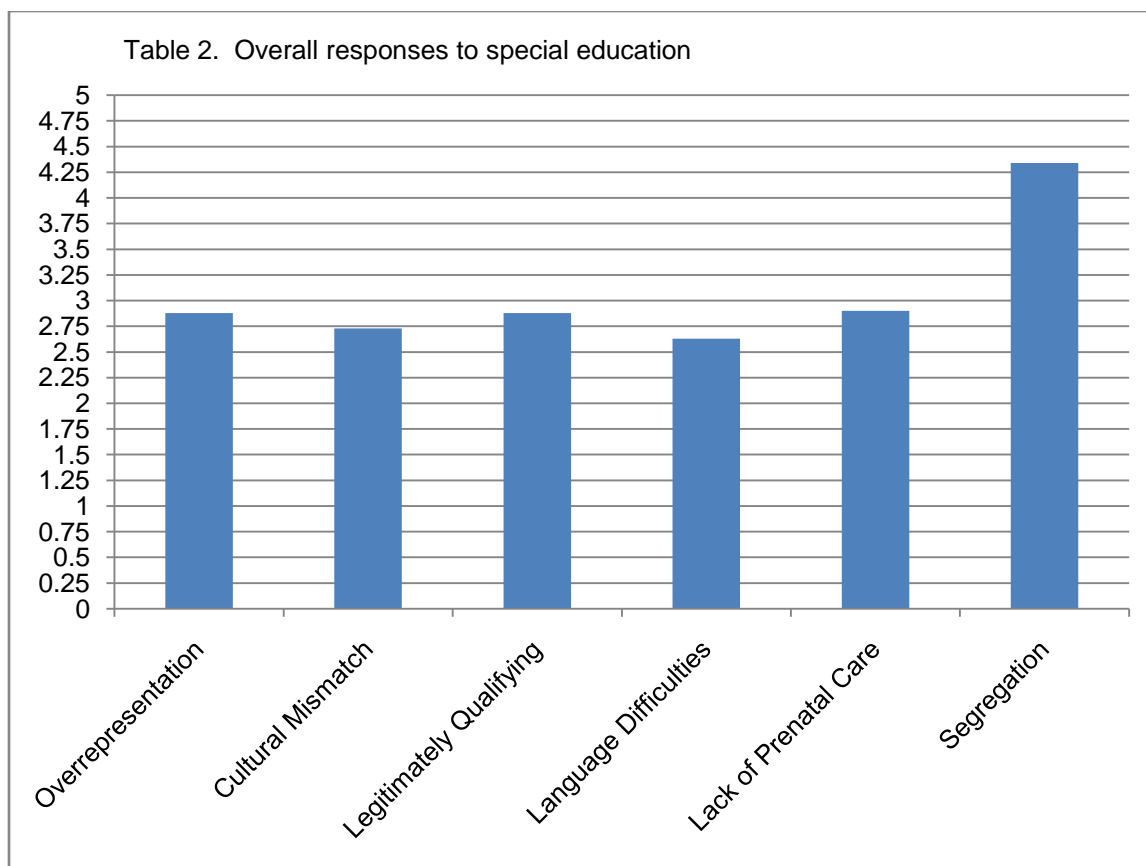
That being said, overall, if we remove the percentage of respondents who answered with “neither true nor false”, each area of focus (social welfare, special education, school disciplinary referrals, the juvenile justice system, and the adult justice system) had a higher percentage of responses perceiving that overrepresentation existed than responses perceiving that it did not. This clearly reflects the literature in that nationwide, overrepresentation exists within each of these areas, and the rural professionals surveyed clearly perceive that it exists within their community, to at least some degree, as well. This is also reflected by the fact that 65% professionals responded that they believed overrepresentation existed in either just rural or both rural and urban environments while only 35% responded that it existed in urban only or neither environment.

**Social welfare.** As Table 1 illustrates, Hispanic families experiencing disproportionate amounts of poverty, being more reliant on social assistance programs, parents being of a lower average age, and having a language barrier are areas that professionals believed contributed to overrepresentation. Racial discrimination by social service professionals, parents having an inability to care for their children, and maltreatment were believed to be less contributing and responses for family structure and drug/alcohol use were neutral.

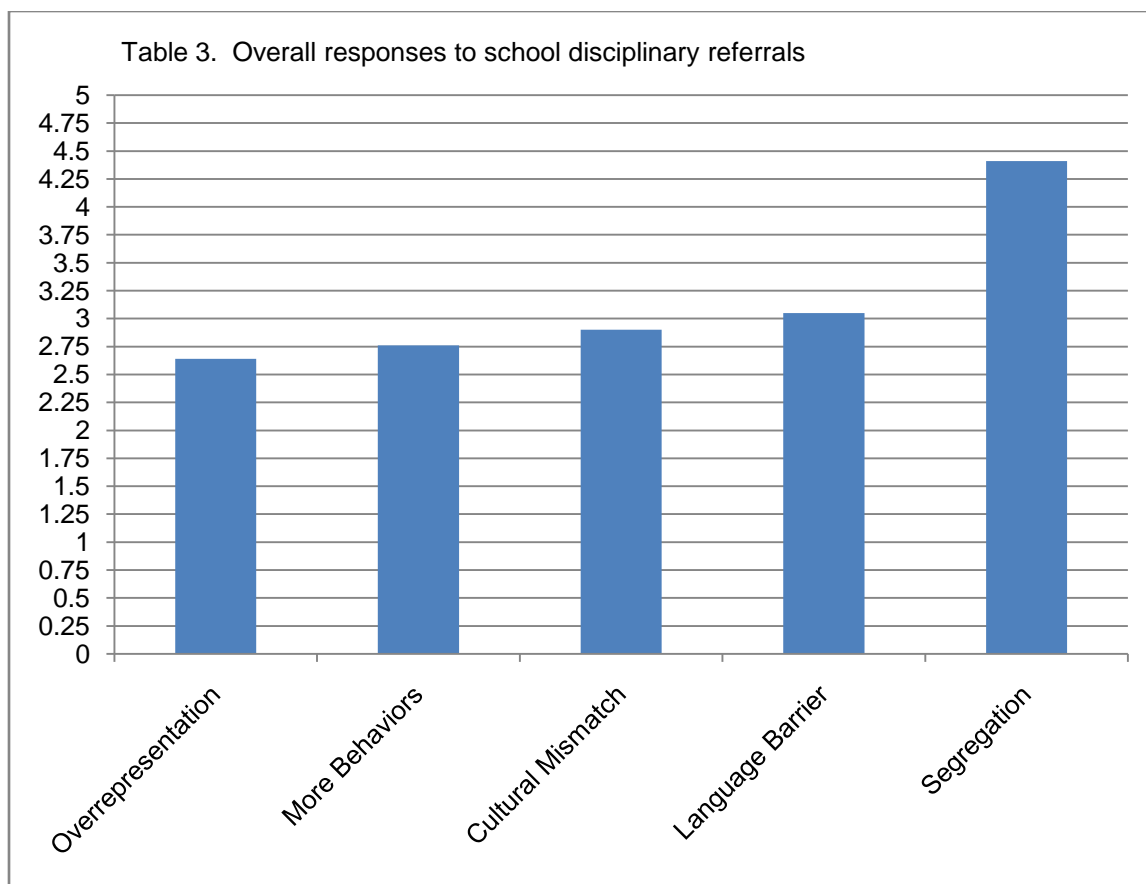


**Special education.** Table 2 shows that despite the neutral responses to the perceived existence of overrepresentation in special education, there were stronger perceptions about what would contribute to it. Cultural mismatch between students and teachers and referrals for language difficulties had responses indicating they contributed. Hispanic students legitimately qualifying for special education and lack of prenatal care were responded to as being possible contributors, but were more neutral than those previously listed. Hispanic students placed in special education as a way of segregation was strongly responded to as not being a contributing factor to overrepresentation.





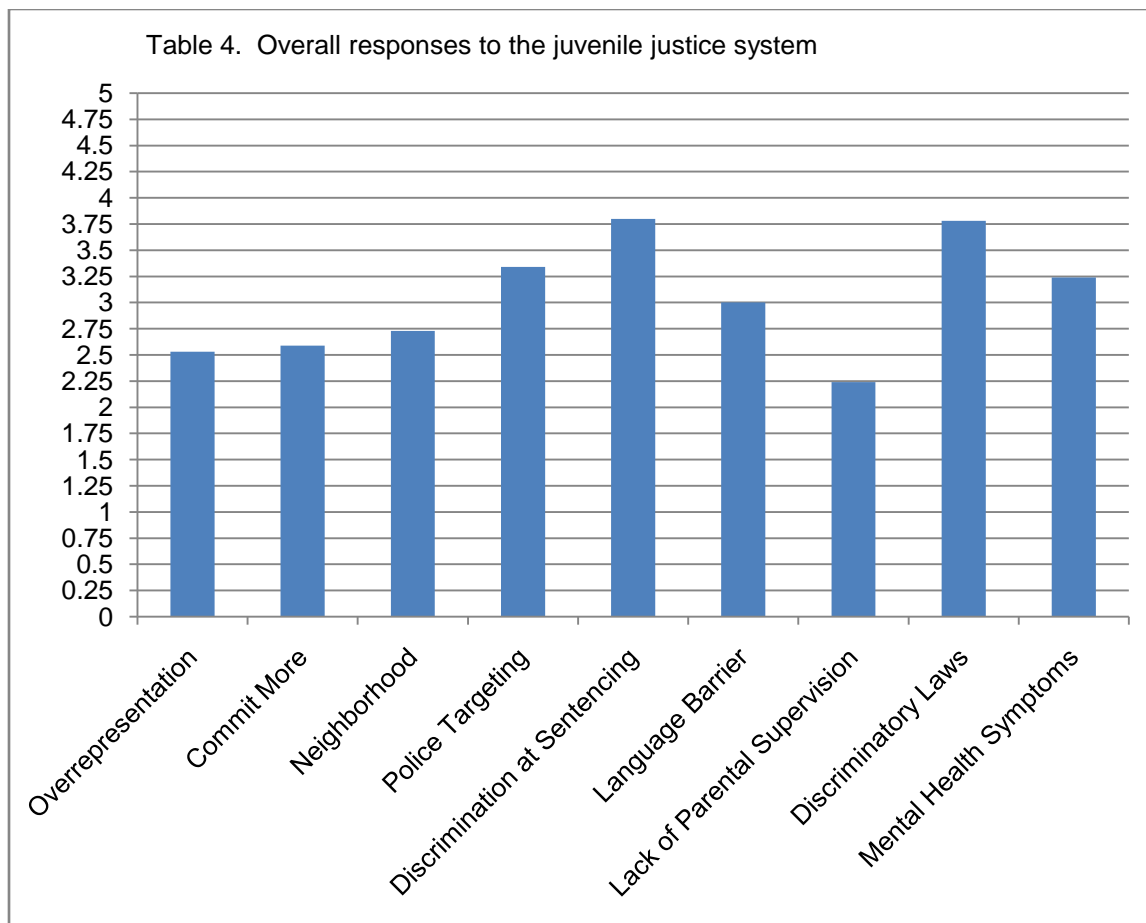
**School disciplinary referrals.** Overrepresentation in school disciplinary referrals was strongly responded to as and as illustrated in Table 3, segregation was again not perceived as a contributing factor to overrepresentation. Hispanic students displaying more behaviors that warranted disciplinary referrals was perceived to be a contributing factor, a cultural mismatch between teachers and students was thought to be more neutral, and a language barrier between teachers and students was thought to be highly neutral.



Again, it is important to note the responses that contradict a large body of research on overrepresentation in schools (both special education and school disciplinary referrals) in which respondents overwhelmingly answered “false” to questions regarding segregation being a contributing factor. Perhaps placing minority students into special education classes or giving them detention/suspension is no longer a means of segregating them from their white peers. However, segregation as a word has very negative connotations in most peoples’ minds, therefore, potentially biasing peoples’ responses so as to not perceive themselves or their peers as participating in such an outdated and unacceptable act.

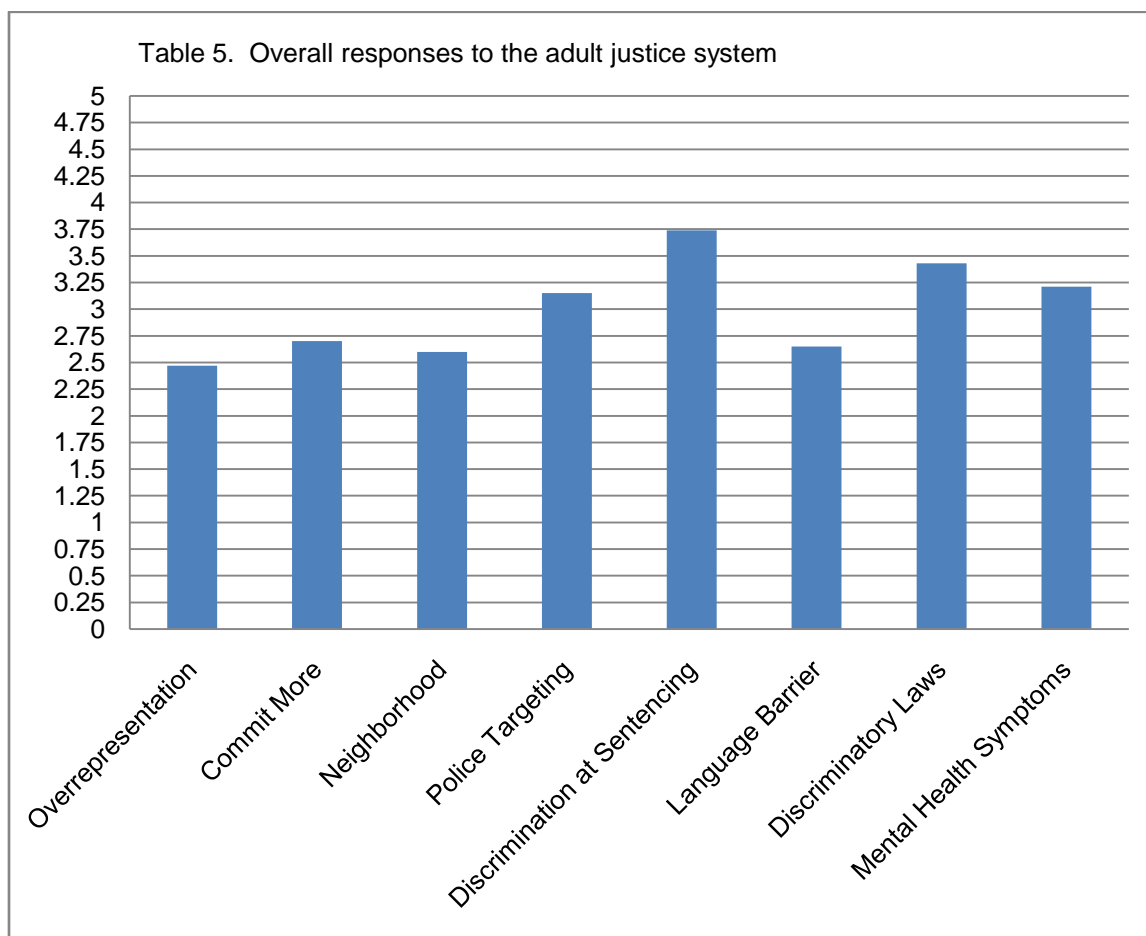
**Juvenile justice system.** As shown in Table 4, Hispanic youth committing more crime, living in neighborhoods more likely to have police presence, and Hispanic youth

having less parental supervision were all perceived as contributors. In contrast, police discrimination, discrimination at sentencing, harsher laws for crimes typically committed by Hispanic youth, and mental health symptoms being wrongfully perceived were responded to as being non-contributors. The only neutral contributor was that Hispanic youth were experiencing a language barrier within the justice system.



**Adult justice system.** Illustrated in Table 5, perceptions regarding contributing factors are very similar to those for the juvenile justice system, with the only major difference being that respondents did believe that a language barrier was a contributing factor for Hispanic adults as opposed to Hispanic youth. This is likely due to adults in the community being immigrants from a Spanish speaking country with little formal

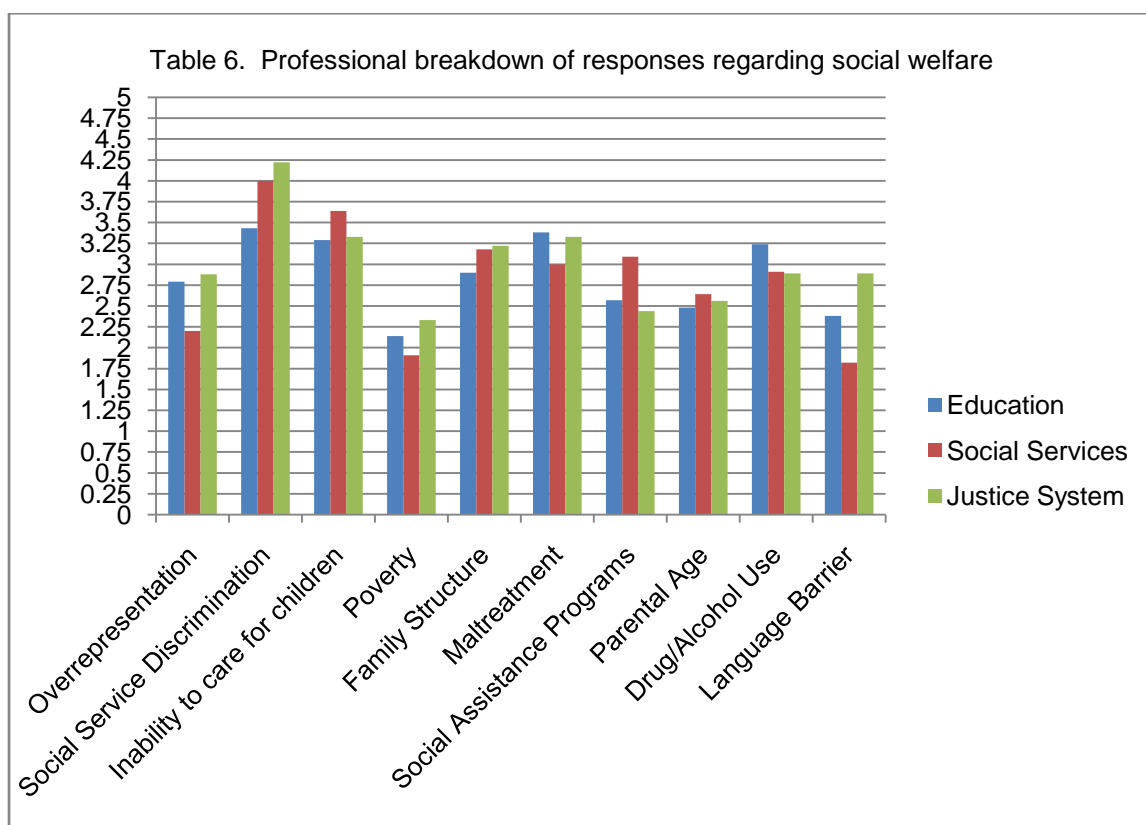
English training, whereas their children who would potentially be involved in the juvenile justice system would have been in school and taught English, therefore not experiencing this barrier.



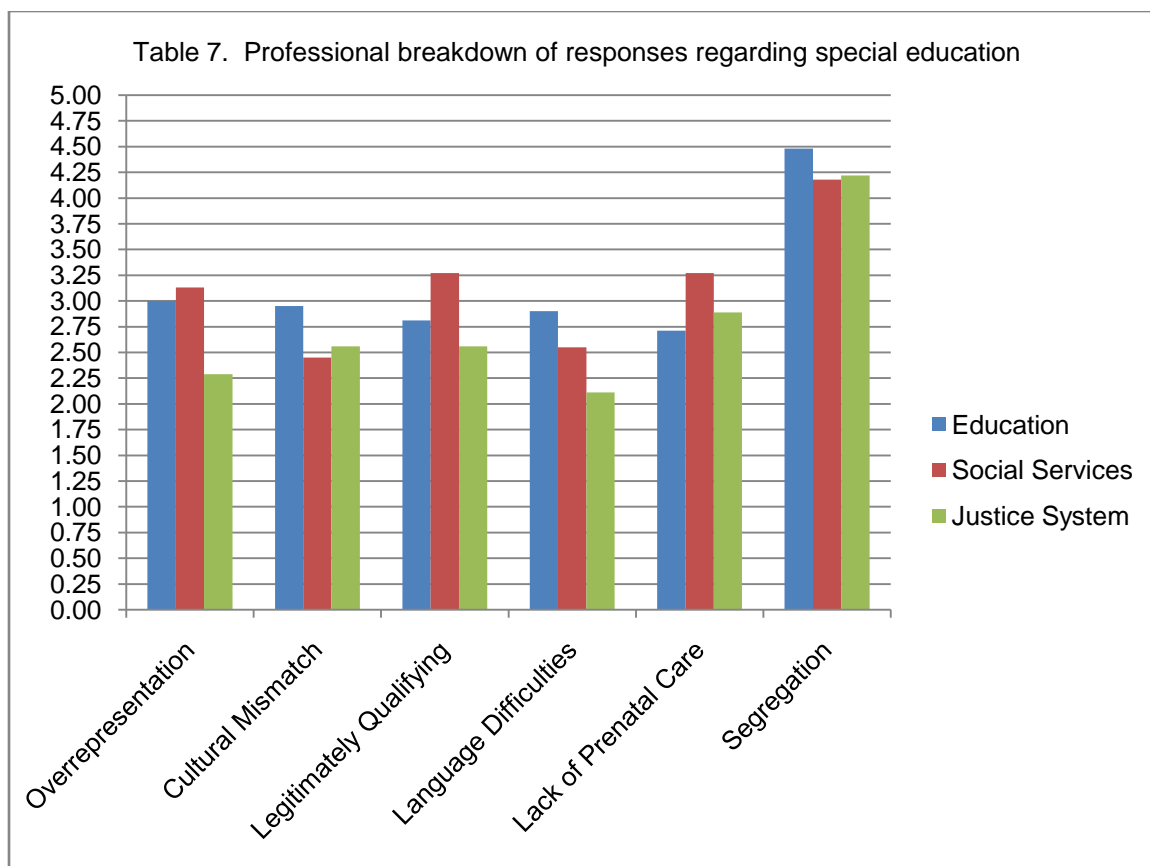
### Responses Based on Profession

**Social welfare.** Overrepresentation within the realm of social welfare was perceived by all professions as existing. However, social service professionals perceived it to be more true than education or justice system professionals. As Table 6 shows, the perceptions regarding why vary between professions as well, particularly in regards to language barriers (true to varying degrees), racial discrimination by social service professionals (false to varying degrees), and reliance on social assistance programs

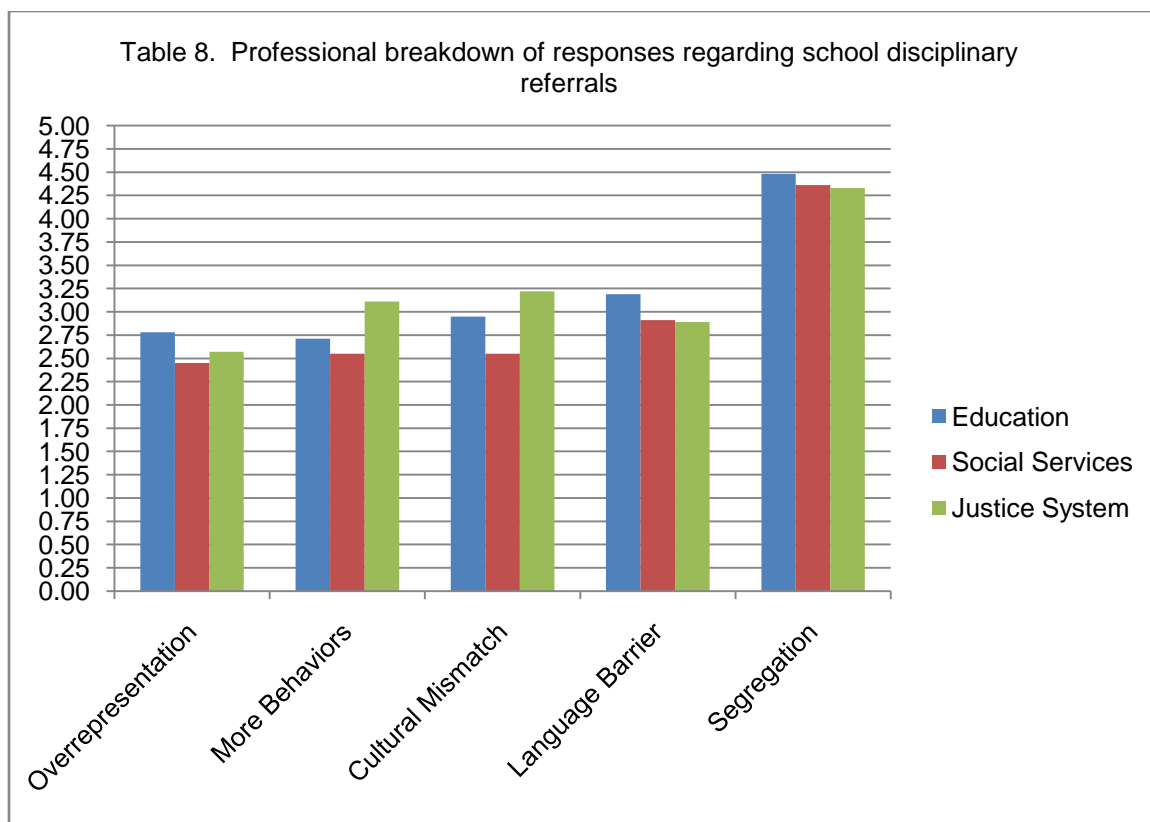
(varying from true to false). There was a general consensus between professionals about the contributing factor of Hispanic parents being of a lower average age being true.



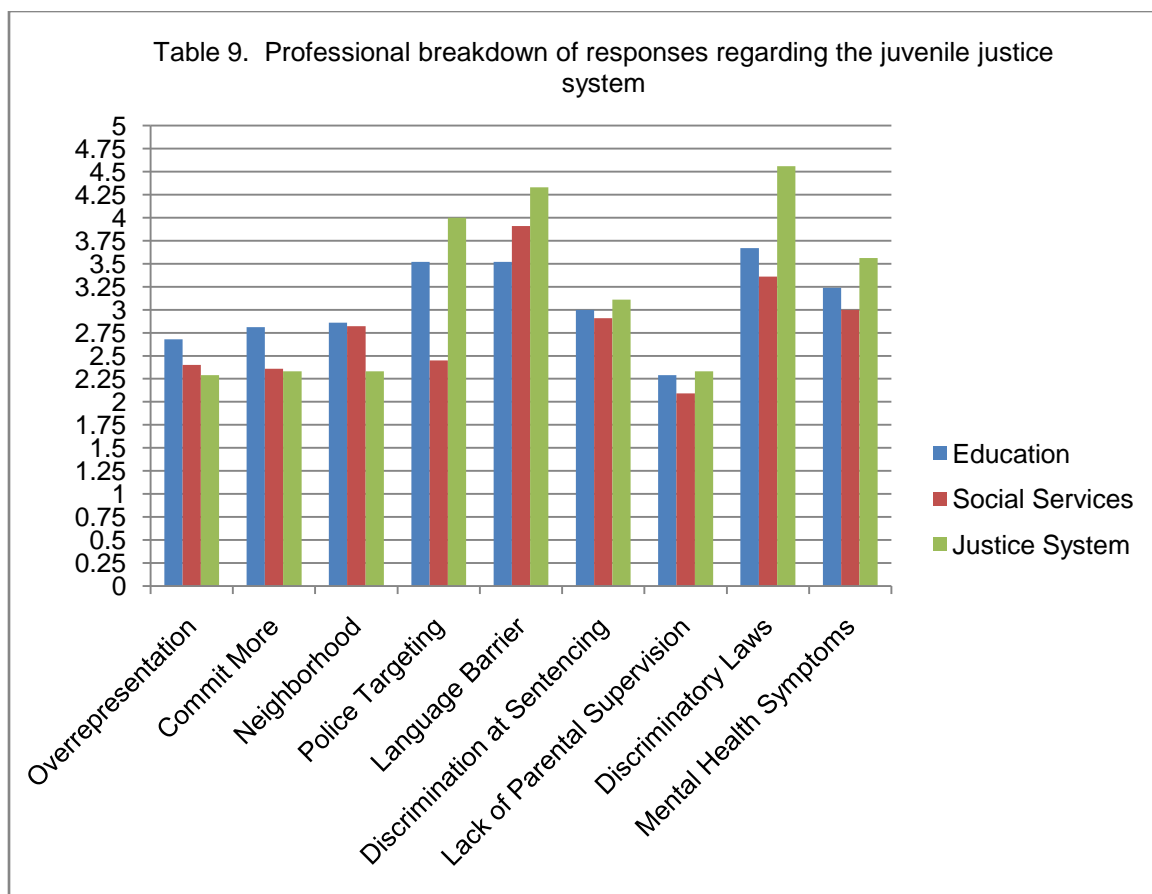
**Special education.** In regards to special education, professionals in education responded neutrally to overrepresentation existing, social service professionals responded as it being slightly false, but justice system professionals perceived it to be true. Table 7 demonstrates there was a very large discrepancy in regards to lack of prenatal care (varying from true to false), legitimate qualification for special education (varying from true to false), and language barrier (true to varying degrees).



**School disciplinary referrals.** Overrepresentation in school disciplinary referrals was perceived by all professions as being true to varying degrees. Table 8 illustrates that perceptions varied greatly in regards to cultural mismatches between teachers and students (varying from true to false) and students displaying more behaviors warranting referrals (varying from true to false). Responses regarding segregation (false) and language barrier (neutral) were fairly consistent across disciplines.

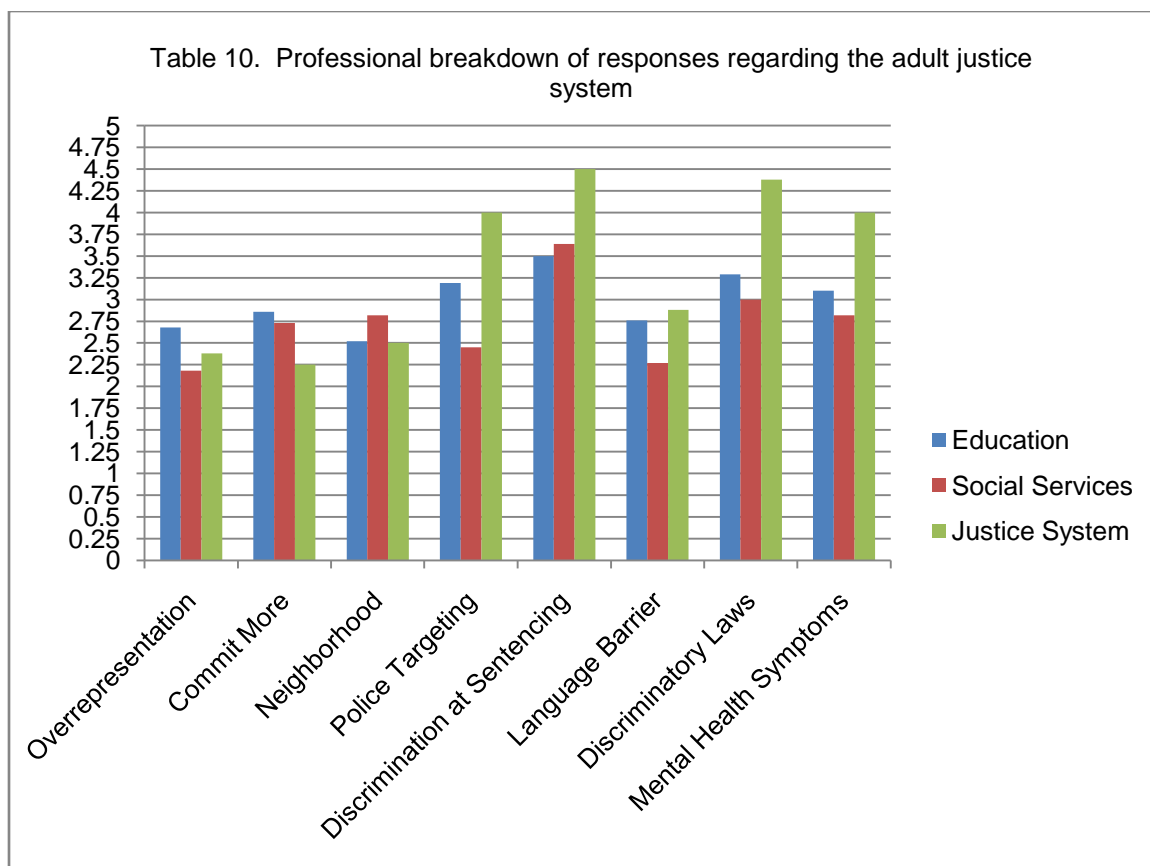


**Juvenile justice system.** Responses to overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system trended toward the “true” side between all professions. Table 9 demonstrates that there were very large discrepancies between professions in regards to whether a contributing factor was not only true or false, but the degree to which it was. There were large discrepancies regarding police discrimination (varying from true to false), discriminatory laws (false to varying degrees), discrimination at sentencing (false to varying degrees), mental health symptoms (varying from neutral to false), neighborhoods with more police presence (true to varying degrees), and committing more crime (true to varying degrees).



**Adult justice system.** Overrepresentation in the adult justice system was responded to as “true” by all professions, but the contributing factors for this overrepresentation varied greatly between professions. Table 10 illustrates that a very large discrepancy exists in perception between professions in relation to police discrimination (varying from true to false), discriminatory laws (varying from neutral to false), discrimination at sentencing (false to varying degrees), and mental health symptoms presenting as criminal behavior (varying from true to false). There was also moderate discrepancy in regards to committing more crime (true to varying degrees) and language barrier (true to varying degrees).





**Professional involvement.** The discrepancies between professions was evident across all areas of overrepresentation. In two of the locations on the “school-to-prison pipeline” the profession that worked most closely with that location, also responded the most strongly of the three professions that overrepresentation did exist. When asked if overrepresentation existed within social welfare, justice system professionals responded close to neutral, education professionals responded slightly more true, but social services professionals responded much closer to true. This was also the case with the juvenile justice system as well, with education professionals responding with closer to neutral, social services professionals closer to true, and justice system professionals as very true.

In contrast, when looking at overrepresentation in special education, social service professionals found it to be the most false, education professionals found it to be neutral,

and justice system professionals found it to be very true. This was also the case when looking at school disciplinary referrals with social service professionals' responses trending toward true, justice system professionals slightly less so, and education professionals' being the close to neutral.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The data of this study indicates that perceptions among professionals vary greatly. As a social worker, we have a responsibility to our clients or patients, but we also have a responsibility to our peers. They not only include fellow social workers, but anyone that we work with professionally. By understanding that all professionals come to the table with different perceptions in regards to overrepresentation we are better prepared to work in a multidisciplinary team to provide our clients or patients with the best possible outcomes for success.

Within the section regarding social welfare, poverty was selected as being the most true contributor to overrepresentation of Hispanics. The next most true response was that there is a language barrier between social service workers and Hispanic families. This trend continues into special education in regards to language issues, becomes neutral in regards to adolescent Hispanics when looking at school disciplinary referrals and the juvenile justice system, but reappears again within the adult justice system. While believing language barriers and poverty are strong contributing factors to overrepresentation of racial minority families in these various settings, the data also shows cause for hope. Older Hispanic adults are likely to have immigrated to the United States and this rural community, typically resulting in Spanish being their first language, and English being their second, if at all. As this generation had children, they went

through a school system that taught them English formally and based on these rural professionals' perceptions, the language barrier is not an issue when working with adolescents in this population. As these children age, they will be the adults that professionals are working with and perhaps the language barrier will cease to be a contributing factor. Furthermore, the language barrier is often seen as a contributing factor to poverty, as it is difficult to seek professional degrees without being able to communicate in English. If language is not a perceived obstacle for these adolescents, perhaps they will have the ability to seek higher education, leading to higher wages, and removing poverty as a contributing factor in overrepresentation as well.

As stated previously, the findings regarding how professionals perceived the existence of overrepresentation varied. In some cases, the profession most closely associated with that location on the "school-to-prison pipeline" felt overrepresentation existed the most, but in other cases, the profession one would perceive to be the most removed from that location felt overrepresentation existed the most. This suggests a lack of cohesion or communication between all of those involved in the "school-to-prison pipeline" and perhaps suggests education across disciplines so that all professionals are informed of the processes along the way as well as can provide perspective for one another.

The same principle of education could be applied in regards to the findings that social service professionals' responses in regards to Hispanic families disproportionately relying on social assistance programs were very neutral. However, educational professionals perceived it to be fairly true and justice system professionals even more so. This may stem from the stereotype that racial minorities "take advantage of the system"

and this may be influencing opinion. Similarly, social service professionals perceive the language barrier to be a much greater issue than do educational professionals and justice system professionals. This is important, in that again, perhaps perceptions between professions are misinformed and could benefit from multidisciplinary interaction.

### **Implications for Social Work Policy**

The overall finding that rural professionals perceive overrepresentation to exist across all stages of the “school-to-prison pipeline” indicates that policy regarding racial minorities must be of the utmost concern, particularly in regards to social welfare and special education. It is at these two levels that policy has the ability to create the biggest change because there are numerous programs that are involved with both. It is also important to focus on these two areas as they are both highly correlated with changing a child’s trajectory in regards to the pipeline, with positive intervention potentially resulting in them being removed from that negative trajectory. By ensuring that a young child’s family is getting the services they need and that a possible language issue is not sending them into special education classes and therefore removing them from receiving an education they are fully capable of handling, the long term implications could be life-altering.

Policies within the justice system, both at the juvenile and adult level, must also be a focus for social workers involved in the criminal justice sector. By being a strong advocate for mental health treatment within the criminal justice field, overrepresentation could be corrected short term by providing services to a minority individual in need, but also provide long-term solutions by eliminating the behavior seen as criminal by tending to a mental health issue.

### **Implications for Social Work Research**

In social work practice, it is important to know where our client is coming from to best know how to help them. This study has laid that foundation in a research sense. In order to know how to best help correct the problem of overrepresentation, we must first understand how professionals involved in the systems may create or perpetuate it perceive that overrepresentation. By having a clear picture of which professionals believe overrepresentation exists, where they believe it exists, and why they believe it exists, it points us in the right direction as clinicians and researchers to know where to begin addressing such issues. Further research should focus on whether these perceptions are similar or different in other rural areas, other rural areas that contain a racial minority other than Hispanics, as well as focus on concrete numbers. Rural professionals in this study perceive overrepresentation to exist in their communities, but there are no concrete numbers in this study to support or contradict that. Seeing actual numbers of how many Hispanic families utilize social services, how many of them have difficulty with the English language, and how many of them receive assistance in comparison to their white counterparts would give social work practice an idea as to where the problem really lies in the context of overrepresentation. This can also be applied to the other areas this study looked at along the “school-to-prison pipeline”.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study’s strengths center greatly around its use of previous literature. The research instrument was derived of topics already proposed in previous studies and the emphasis on further research in both rural and Hispanic populations is evident. By using previous literature the research instrument was able to focus on each location of concern

on the school-to-prison pipeline. Great precautions were taken to ensure anonymity of all participants despite it being a rural study in which the potential for low response numbers also left the potential for personal identification to be compromised.

The limitations of this study are primarily due to time and location. Because of the timeline in which this research had to be conducted, surveying only one rural location was achievable. Due to the small number of professionals within the community, a low sample size was available. Furthermore, agencies could not be broken down more specifically for analysis because with agencies containing so few professionals, anonymity may have been compromised simply by the power of elimination. Also, there are certain professionals who may be relevant to the school-to-prison pipeline that simply do not exist within the specific rural setting surveyed. While the research tool being created by the researcher was strength, it can also be seen as a limitation. It is uncertain as to how reliable and valid the tool. Also, it was created with a neutral response option, which perhaps could be taken out in future replications to avoid the large frequency of neutral responses received in this study.

### **Conclusion**

As previously stated, overrepresentation of racial minorities has been shown to be a pervasive issue across the United States. The current research adds to this body of knowledge and reiterates that social work is a key area in creating change. Social welfare, special education, school disciplinary referrals, the juvenile justice system, and the adult justice system all contain some context in which social work could intervene. Therefore, the social work profession is afforded the opportunity to interject and prevent what appears to be the potential for a lifelong journey on a negative path.

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## Appendix A

### Participant Survey Introduction

Dear professionals,

████████████████████ and currently a graduate student at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University Master's of Social Work program.

I am conducting a study about rural professionals' perceptions regarding the overrepresentation of racial minorities (in the case of ██████████ Hispanics happen to be the primary racial minority) in social welfare, special education, school disciplinary referrals, the juvenile justice system, and the adult justice system. The objective of this research project is to better understand if and how professionals' perceptions in a rural setting might differ from previous studies that have focused on urban environments.

At the bottom of this e-mail is the link to a brief survey (less than 10 minutes) asking a variety of questions about your degrees of belief regarding the overrepresentation of Hispanics in various settings as well as the degree to which you believe different variables contribute toward that phenomenon.

I hope you will take a few minutes to complete this survey. Your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty if you do not participate. All of your answers are confidential and the survey link is secure.

If you have any questions or concerns about completing the survey or about participating in this study, you may contact me at ██████████ or at ██████████@stthomas.edu . If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of St. Thomas IRB Office at (651) 962-5341.

Sincerely,

Jessica Christenson

*Social Work Graduate Student*

*University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University*

## **Appendix B**

### **Survey**

#### **Rural Professionals' Perceptions**

The following questions address your beliefs as a professional regarding potential over-representation of Hispanics in your rural community (i.e. [REDACTED]).

Over-representation is defined as a racial group being overrepresented in a sub-population (i.e. social welfare, special education, etc.) in comparison to their representation in the general population (i.e. the whole school, town, county, etc.). Note that the researcher understands that you may not believe over-representation exists in some or all of the settings given. For this reason, in the subsequent questions, you are invited to consider factors that do influence over-representation in your community, or if you do not believe it exists in your community, what you believe would be the influence if it did.

I have read the above information and provide consent for the following responses to be used for research purposes and understand that those responses are anonymous.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Which best describes the profession that you are a member of:

- ☐ Education
- ☐ Social Services
- ☐ Justice System

Please check the box representing how you rate the following statements:

Hispanics are overrepresented in social welfare (i.e. removal of children from the home, placement into foster care, etc.)

- ☐ Definitely True  
☐ Probably True  
☐ Neither True nor False  
☐ Probably False  
☐ Definitely False

Potential over-representation could be due to:

	Definitely True	Probably True	Neither True nor False	Probably False	Definitely False
Hispanic families being racially discriminated against by social services professionals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic parents disproportionate inability to care for their children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic families experiencing a disproportionate amount of poverty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic families having a less desirable family structure (i.e. single parent household v. dual parent household)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic families having a greater history	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

<p>of maltreatment in their home (i.e. physical abuse, neglect, etc.)</p> <p>Hispanic families being more reliant on social assistance programs (i.e. food stamps, WIC, emergency assistance, housing subsidies, etc.)</p> <p>Hispanic parents being of a lower average age</p> <p>Hispanic families having a higher drug/alcohol use rate</p> <p>Hispanic families facing a language barrier with social services professionals</p>	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○	○

Please check the box representing how you rate the following statements:

Hispanics are overrepresented in special education

- ☐ Definitely True  
☐ Probably True  
☐ Neither True nor False  
☐ Probably False  
☐ Definitely False

Potential over-representation could be due to:

	Definitely True	Probably True	Neither True nor False	Probably False	Definitely False
A cultural mismatch between Hispanic students and their teachers (i.e. a cultural barrier)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic students legitimately qualifying for special education more than their white peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic students being referred to special education services because of language difficulties	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic students experience a lack of prenatal care	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

that effects their cognitive development  Hispanic students are placed in special education as a way of segregation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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Please check the box representing how you rate the following statements:

Hispanics are overrepresented in school discipline referrals

- ☐ Definitely True  
☐ Probably True  
☐ Neither True nor False  
☐ Probably False  
☐ Definitely False

Potential over-representation could be due to:

	Definitely True	Probably True	Neither True nor False	Probably False	Definitely False
Hispanic students display more behaviors that warrant discipline referrals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A cultural mismatch between Hispanic students and their teachers (i.e. acceptable classroom behavior v. cultural norms)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic students and their teachers failing to properly communicate due to a language barrier	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic students are given detention/suspension as a way of segregating them	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please check the box representing how you rate the following statements:

Hispanics are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system

- ☐ Definitely True  
☐ Probably True  
☐ Neither True nor False  
☐ Probably False  
☐ Definitely False

Potential over-representation could be due to:

	Definitely True	Probably True	Neither True nor False	Probably False	Definitely False
Hispanic youth committing more crime	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic youth living in neighborhoods that are more likely to have police presence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic youth being discriminated against by police (i.e. targeted)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic youth being discriminated against at sentencing (i.e. assumed guilty)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic youth experiencing a language barrier between themselves and those they	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



encounter in the justice system					
Hispanic youth being less likely to have parental supervision	○	○	○	○	○
Laws that give harsher punishment to crimes more typically committed by Hispanic youth	○	○	○	○	○
Hispanic youth mental health symptoms being seen as criminal action	○	○	○	○	○

Please check the box representing how you rate the following statements:

Hispanics are overrepresented in the adult justice system

- ☐ Definitely True  
☐ Probably True  
☐ Neither True nor False  
☐ Probably False  
☐ Definitely False

Potential over-representation could be due to:

	Definitely True	Probably True	Neither True nor False	Probably False	Definitely False
Hispanic adults committing more crime	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic adults living in neighborhoods that are more likely to have police presence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic adults being discriminated against by police (i.e. targeted)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic adults being discriminated against at sentencing (i.e. assumed guilty)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic adults experiencing a language barrier between themselves	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

and those they encounter in the justice system					
Laws that give harsher punishment to crimes more typically committed by Hispanic adults	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hispanic adults mental health symptoms being seen as criminal action	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Over-representation is an issue in:

- ☐ Urban environments
- ☐ Rural environments
- ☐ Neither
- ☐ Both

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!